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ABSTRACT

To combat the shortage and high turnover rate of rural special education teachers, Utah State University (USU) special education faculty members developed university-school district partnerships. The partnerships recruit and train local community members as certified mild/moderate special education teachers and supervise student participation in practica and student teaching experiences in remote rural sites. Distance education technology delivers training to preservice special education teachers in their local communities. Community adjunct university supervisors and cooperating teachers are trained by university faculty to supervise field-based practica courses. Supervisors are often district-level special educators who completed or are familiar with the USU program. Cooperating teachers, who are often graduates of the USU on-campus or distance education program, assist with supervision in partnership with the adjunct supervisors. Training is conducted on site, on campus, and via distance education technology. University and district supervisors and cooperating teachers also supervise students together using remote two-way audio/video teleconferencing technology. This allows on-campus and on-site supervisors to hear and see the remote site classroom at the same time. The amount and quality of feedback and training that students receive in remote sites is increased and mirrors that received by on-campus students. (Contains 25 references.) (TD)

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UNIVERSITY AND SCHOOL DISTRICT PARTNERS GO THE DISTANCE TO "GROW" SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Critical Shortages of Special Education Teachers

The United States is reportedly facing the largest teacher shortages in history (Pipho, 1998). The shortages are most pronounced for teachers of students with disabilities (Boe, Cook, Bobbit, & Terhanian, 1998; Simpson, Whalen & Zabel, 1993). Critical shortages of special education teachers are not new and not limited to a specific geographic region or type of community (Billingsley, 1993; Boe, Cook, Bobbitt & Terhanian, 1998; Brownell & Smith, 1992). The shortages are pervasive and impact rural and urban districts alike (Lauritzen & Friedman, 1993).

The Department of Education reports that 28,000 new teachers are needed annually and that higher education institutions only supply approximately 18,000 per year (20th Annual Report to Congress, 1998). From 1987 to 1996 there was a chronic yearly shortage of 27,000 special educators. During the 1995-1996 school year alone, there was a nationwide shortage of approximately 33,000 fully certified special education teachers. About 1.1% of these positions were never filled, while 7.9% were filled by teachers who were not fully certified (20th Annual Report to Congress, 1998).

Shortages of certified special education teachers are most critical in rural areas of the country (Koury, Ludlow, & Weinke, 1991; Robins, 1994). Although the total number of special education teachers needed in rural areas is not as large as the number in urban areas, filling these open teaching positions may be more problematic (Thurston & Sebastian, 1996). Rural special education teachers may be difficult to recruit and may not stay as long in their positions thus creating higher levels of attrition and greater continual demand for teachers in rural areas. In a survey of 158 rural special education teachers, Westling and Whitten (1996) found that only 57% of the special education teachers surveyed reported that they were likely to be in their current position in 5 years.

Utah is experiencing critical special education teacher shortages in all areas of the state. In response to a long history of chronic shortages, the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) created a critical personnel shortages committee to study the problem. The committee is comprised of district special education directors, university special education faulty, and USOE staff. In a 1997-2000 study commissioned by the committee, researchers found that approximately 10% of the special education teachers working in Utah schools left the classroom each year (Anderson, Menlove, & Salzberg, in press; Adams, Menlove, & Salzberg, 2001). Many of these vacated special education teaching positions were filled with non-licensed "teachers." In some cases these "teachers" were long-term substitutes without college degrees or special education training.

Training Teachers in Their Local Communities

One strategy to address special education teacher shortages is to bring university special education teacher preparation programs to rural communities via distance education (Menlove, Hansford, & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2000). This approach allows local community members to become trained to take special education teaching positions within the schools. By assisting communities to "grow their own" teachers, many barriers associated with attracting and retaining professionals from outside the community are reduced. Community members, who are trained and

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certified to teach, are more likely to remain in the community because of such things as cultural ties, community pride, geographical constraints, family relationships, and a desire to improve their community (Recruiting New Teachers, 2000).

The Utah State University Departments of Special Education and Rehabilitation and Extension, in partnership with local school districts, offer bachelor's degrees and teacher certification for mild/moderate special education teachers in rural Utah areas. The Utah teachers, who are trained in the rural communities where they live, are more likely to stay and work in their rural communities (Binner, 1998). The teachers are community members with strong commitments to local students. They have already made a commitment to live in the rural community.

The preservice special education teachers receive training delivered to their local communities via a variety of distance education technologies. On campus and local adjunct faculty deliver the same courses to distance students as they deliver to on campus students. A significant portion of the training for special education teachers, however, takes place in field-based practica experiences in local school classrooms (Koury et al., 1991; McDevitt, 1996). Because the local schools are located from two to four hours from the university campus, the question of who will supervise the field-based experiences is a problem. The most effective model for supervision is a traditional triadic model including a cooperating teacher, university supervisor, and pre-service teacher (Giebelhaus, 1995). Both a cooperating teacher and university supervisor are needed. The university supervisor teaches general principles and assists the preservice teachers to incorporate both theoretical and practical experiences into teaching (Kauffman, 1992). The university supervisor may suggest newly developed teaching strategies or instructional programs. The triadic model of supervision, however, is only effective when there are frequent visits involving all three members (Giebelhaus, 1995). If the field-based experience occurs in a remote rural location, frequent visits may not be feasible.

One solution to this problem is to train local community cooperating teachers to conduct some of the visits, which may be cost effective and practical (Keller & Grossman, 1994). Unfortunately, Koskela and Ganser (1995) report that cooperating teachers rarely have time available to observe and provide feedback to their field-based students. Cooperating teachers may also be unsure about how to deal with students who are not performing satisfactorily, how to evaluate the students, how to direct them, and how to deal with differences in teaching styles (Koskela & Ganser, 1995).

Incorporating distance education technology may also increase interaction between students, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors. Internet-based two-way audio video conferencing has reduced the cost of distance technology interaction and made remote supervision feasible (Binner, 1998; Falconer & Lignugaris-Kraft, in press; Fodor-Davis, 1996; Menlove, Hansford, & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2000). With a two-way audio video conferencing system, university supervisors can observe remote field-based teaching experiences from a site on campus. This type of technology may not only reduce feelings of isolation among distance education students, but also provides opportunities for collaboration between cooperating teachers and campus instructors (McDevitt, 1996).

In a move to incorporate on-site supervision and remote technology supervision, USU special education faculty developed a model for supervising students participating in practica and student teaching experiences in remote rural sites. This model combines training local community adjunct university supervisors and cooperating teachers with remote site supervision using two-way audio video teleconferencing technology (Binner, 1998; Falconer & Lignugaris-Kraft, in press; Menlove, Hansford, & Lignugaris-Kraft; Pemberton & Harris, 1997). On campus faculty train local district special educators to use the skills necessary to be effective university supervisors and cooperating teachers. Faculty, supervisors, and cooperating teachers then conduct supervision together using the two-way audio video teleconferencing technology. This allows both on campus and on site supervisors to hear and see what is happening in the remote site classroom. The amount and quality of feedback and training that students receive in remote sites is the same as that received by on campus students.

University and District Partnerships

In the USU Mild/Moderate Special Education Distance Education Program, university faculty members and rural school special educators truly become partners in an effort to train local community members to become certified special education teachers. The partnerships serve multiple purposes including recruiting students to enter

the program, teaching didactic courses via distance education, and providing supervision in field-based practica and student teaching.

Recruiting students. Local school district special education administrators and special education teachers identify community members who may be interested in teacher careers. They distribute USU program information to the potential teachers and arrange for meetings with university advisors. When asked to identify reasons why rural special education teachers would leave, some teachers reported that the quality of the community was a problem (Westling & Whitten, 1996). Potential teachers who are already know the community variables and are committed to living in there, may not leave due to community reasons.

The population most often identified by districts partners as potential teachers are paraeducators working in special education classrooms. Paraeducators who work in communities experiencing teacher shortages are a rich source of candidates who could be prepared, certificated, and employed as special educators. In the 21st Annual Report to Congress, the Office of Special Education reported that in 1996-97 there were 237,206 paraeducators serving students with disabilities. This large pool of people is already committed to working with students with disabilities. Many have veteran status within schools, knowledge of school operations, experience working with the students in their community, reduced language barriers, knowledge and appreciation for the cultural diversity, and an increased likelihood that they will remain in the community long term once their training is completed. The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education reports that the number of paraeducators working in public schools is expected to continue to grow (Genzuk, Lavendez & Krashen, 1994; Recruiting New Teachers, 2000).

In an attempt to increase resources and support for students in remote rural communities, USU has hired local part-time advisors in each of the locations served by the distance education degree/certification program. The part-time advisors are either local district special education teachers or parents who have successfully completed the distance education program and obtained a bachelor's degree and teacher certification in special education. The advisors collaborate with the community USU extension programs, the main campus department, and the local school districts. They recruit potential students and provide support for students progressing through the program.

Not only are the advisors providing a valuable service for the university and the students, they are participating in an intensive professional development activity. Their careers are enhanced as they learn university requirements and protocol and as they become resident "experts" in their local districts.

Teaching didactic courses. Due to the tremendous demand for special education teachers, university faculty resources are often stretched to meet that demand. University faculty members teach special education distance education courses in addition to their regular on campus instructional load. At times, faculty members are unable to teach an additional distance education section. When that happens, local school district special educators are hired and trained to teach the courses. The district personnel become adjunct instructors for the university and partners in the university community. The local district educators are most often district level special education administrators or high-skilled, experienced teachers who are understand the USU program.

Local special education teachers, state level special educators, and parents of students with disabilities are invited to be guest lecturers in the didactic training courses. Practicing special educators and parents bring a unique perspective to class instruction. They provide a practical, day-to-day perspective that university faculty sometimes lack. They are able to share real life, up-to-date experiences with students with disabilities. They provide the applied practical reality that compliments the theory presented in many didactic courses. Students are able to see how the knowledge that they are learning can be applied in actual classroom settings.

Supervising field-based practica and student teaching. USU special education faculty members have developed a university-district partnership model for supervising students participating in practica and student teaching experiences in remote rural sites. Community adjunct university supervisors and cooperating teachers are trained by university faculty to supervise field-based practica courses. Supervisors are often district level special educators who completed or are familiar with the USU program. Cooperating teachers are often graduates of the USU on campus or distance education program. They assist with supervision in partnership with the adjunct supervisors. On campus faculty train the adjunct supervisors and cooperating teachers to use the skills necessary to be effective university supervisors and cooperating teachers. Training is conducted on site, on campus, and via

distance education technology. Training is updated each time a practicum is taught and also prior to and during student teaching. To maintain consistency of on and off campus observations, university faculty conduct reliability observations with adjunct supervisors.

University and district supervisors and cooperating teachers also supervise students together using remote two-way audio video teleconferencing technology (Binner, 1998; Falconer & Lignugaris-Kraft, in press; Menlove, Hansford, & Lignugaris-Kraft; Pemberton & Harris, 1997). This allows both on campus and on site supervisors to hear and see what is happening in the remote site classroom at the same time. The amount and quality of feedback and training that students receive in remote sites is increased and mirrors that received by on campus students.

Conclusions

Training special education teachers in a university-district partnership provides growth opportunities for university faculty, district special education administrators, local special education teachers, and community members who become students and then much needed teachers. Students are recruited from rural communities and have the opportunity to grow and achieve teacher status as they complete bachelor's degrees and receive teacher certification. A number of district personnel become advisors, instructors, supervisors, and some also receive master's degrees via distance education courses delivered in their communities. Their professional growth impacts the quality of the teaching cadre, which positively impacts student learning in rural schools.

Just over six years ago the first cohort of nine students started taking classes in the first USU special education distance education mild/moderate program in a rural eastern Utah community. High rates of attrition and technology challenges plagued this initial cohort. About 55% or 5 of the students earned bachelor's degrees and became certified special education teachers. In the following two years the program was expanded to a starting group of 24 students in two rural Utah areas. At the completion of the program, only 50% or 12 students graduated. The current cohort group was expanded to 41 students in seven rural and urban sites. Approximately 73% or 30 of the students will complete degrees and become fully certified. Of the 30 students, 4 will also complete master's degrees. Five of the current students are moving from regular education to special education teacher positions.

Increased program completion rates support the fact that university faculty have become better distance educators, that more effective student support systems have been constructed, that distance education delivery methods and technologies have improved, and that local districts have become stronger partners in recruiting and training quality candidates for the program.

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